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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 002032

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/12/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [KPAL](#) [KISL](#) [PINR](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: ZARQA: URBAN BLIGHT AND TENTATIVE REFORM IN JORDAN'S INDUSTRIAL CAPITAL

REF: A. 07 AMMAN 4733

[B.](#) 07 AMMAN 4612

[C.](#) 04 AMMAN 9226

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Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Zarqa, Jordan's second largest city, is a symbol of urban decline. The city's unplanned growth, largely the result of migrant and refugee flows, strains the city's insufficient infrastructure and has created an acute housing crunch. A new housing development on the eastern flank of Zarqa which is being administered by the central government in Amman rather than by municipal officials has become a symbol of the lack of trust in Zarqa's elected politicians. Political life in Zarqa is dominated by tribal and Islamist figures who lack the confidence of the state and are therefore denied the resources necessary to direct the city's political and economic future. End Summary.

The Melting Pot

[¶](#)2. (U) Zarqa, a city of over 800,000 people located on the northeast border of Amman, is the second largest city in Jordan. A town shaped by migrant flows, economic growth, and a large military presence, Zarqa has emerged over the years as a melting pot of ethnic and economic affiliations. Zarqa residents are current and former military officers attached to the local air force base, Palestinian refugees residing in the local camp, blue collar workers in Jordan's largest industrial area, and lower middle class families who cannot afford the high cost of living in Amman.

[¶](#)3. (SBU) Few people live in Zarqa because they want to. The city has become a symbol of urban decay, environmental degradation, and political radicalism. The unplanned warren of streets and alleyways are clogged with traffic. Its industrial factories and the nearby oil refinery produce a chemical odor which permeates every corner of the city. Perhaps the most famous representative of Zarqa in recent years has been terrorist mastermind Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Throughout our many meetings with Zarqa residents, all of them confided their plans to leave as soon as they had enough money to do so.

Waves of Migration

[¶](#)4. (U) Since the foundation of the Jordanian state, Zarqa has grown through unplanned inflows of refugees and economic migrants. Chechen farmers were the first group of refugees to set up camp in the city, arriving in the late Ottoman period after being dislocated from their homeland in the Caucuses. In the 1920s, one of the first Jordanian military bases was founded in the desert east of Zarqa, cementing the

city's destiny as a military town. In 1949, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) set up on the edge of Zarqa's city limits the first refugee camp in Jordan for those fleeing from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The camp received another influx of refugees in 1967 -- its current population is over 18,500. In the late 1970s, industrial production in the city brought in working class Jordanians from across the country. In 1991, the Gulf War caused the dislocation of many Jordanian guest workers from Iraq and Kuwait, many of whom settled in Zarqa.

#### The Housing and Infrastructure Crunch

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**¶5.** (U) Zarqa is an extremely crowded city. According to an independent study conducted as part of the city planning process, the population density of Zarqa is 148,000 people per square mile. In Ghweiria, the heart of the old city, the figure rises to 181,000 per square mile. Zarqa's refugee camp (30,000 per square mile) and Jordan as a whole (166 per square mile) seem roomy in comparison. Various attempts have been made to relieve the overcrowding of Zarqa's city center through new construction on the edges of town. The most recent expansion is an area known as "New Zarqa," constructed to the northeast of the city in the early 1990s. Initially envisioned as an area of villas for the wealthy, the builders of New Zarqa quickly realized that there was more demand for larger, down-market apartment complexes, which now dominate the area.

**¶6.** (U) Following a visit by King Abdullah in April 2008 as part of the "Year of Housing" initiative, Zarqa has received over USD 33.6 million in royal court grants designed to improve the city's woefully inadequate infrastructure. The World Bank is also giving the Zarqa municipality a USD 2.4

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million grant in 2009 for infrastructure development. Additionally, USAID is planning a poverty alleviation program that will focus on water, education, and health in the Zarqa area.

**¶7.** (SBU) Most of our contacts tell us that the low cost of housing is the primary motivation for living in Zarqa. With the price of housing in Amman ever increasing, Zarqa remains a reliably low-cost alternative for government workers, retired military officers, and unskilled laborers. Contacts tell us that real estate prices in Zarqa are high in terms of historical levels, but still far lower than their Amman equivalents. The supply of housing in Zarqa is routinely outstripped by demand. One contact living in the old city found himself unable to move because it took him six months to find a vacant apartment.

#### City-Within-A-City

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**¶8.** (U) Perhaps the most ambitious plan for Zarqa's expansion is the new King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz City, a massive new development which is taking shape east of the existing town. (Note: The area is named for the Saudi King, who has pledged to finance USD 28 million of the construction costs. End Note.) In September 2007, Jordan's military (upon royal orders) ceded a large tract of land to the state for the new housing project, which will effectively double the size of the Zarqa metropolitan area and house 500,000 people. The first phase of the project is nearly complete, and features a variety of housing options from subsidized row houses for military families to luxurious villas.

**¶9.** (C) Technically, however, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz City is not a part of the Zarqa municipality. The project is being implemented directly by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, allowing it to set strict zoning regulations and building codes without review by the public. (Note: One Zarqa MP said that this is a tacit recognition that the

"administration of Zarqa proper is too incompetent to be trusted" with such a large development project. End Note.) The move has angered Zarqa municipality officials, who see it as an usurpation of their control of the city's growth. Lack of coordination between the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and the Ministry of Education has also meant delayed construction of schools, causing further overcrowding in the schools of Zarqa proper. Mayor Musa Al-Ghweiri told poloff that he believes the city limits will ultimately be expanded to encompass the new development, but in the meantime it remains a sore point for municipal officials.

## Two Political Machines

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¶10. (SBU) Zarqa boasts ten members of parliament. One of these is a Christian designated seat, and another is designated for an ethnic Chechen. Despite being fifteen percent of Jordan's population, Zarqa province only commands eleven percent of the parliamentary seats. If parliamentary seats were assigned by population numbers alone, Zarqa would gain an additional four seats. (Note: By contrast, the rural town of Karak is just four percent of the population, but has the same number of seats in parliament as Zarqa. End Note.)

¶11. (C) There are two political machines operating in Zarqa: the tribes and the Islamists. Most of the original residents of Zarqa were members of the Beni Hassan tribe, Jordan's largest and arguably most politically influential tribe. While inflows of job seekers and refugees over the years have diluted their numbers, the Beni Hassan are still the largest single block of voters in the city. As a consequence, almost all of Zarqa's political representatives bear the names of clans and families which fall under the larger umbrella of the Beni Hassan tribe -- Ghweiri, Mashqbeh, Khalaileh. Mayor Ghweiri is a product of the tribal machine par excellence: he is well-connected and has a large base of supporters, but has little of the policy knowledge or practical experience needed to run such a complicated and difficult city.

¶12. (C) The Islamists are the other traditional force in Zarqa politics and have long held sway in the heavily Palestinian parts of the city. Politicians talk about the impressive level of organization that the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamic Action Front (IAF) brings to street-level politics in Zarqa. They find it difficult to compete with their established party machinery which is active even when there is no imminent election.

¶13. (C) In spite of the Islamists' recognized weight,

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however, none of Zarqa's current MPs are members of the IAF. This can be attributed to several factors unique to the 2007 parliamentary elections (Ref A). First, tribal candidates eked out victories by splitting the vote and aggressively courting Islamist votes in Palestinian areas. Second, many disillusioned IAF voters organized a boycott of the polls, which was reflected in Zarqa's meager twenty-seven percent turnout rate -- the lowest in Jordan. Third, the IAF ran a strong female candidate in Zarqa who received a large number of votes, but not quite enough to qualify for a seat under the rules for the women's quota. Zarqa's non-Islamist political elite unanimously agree that the 2007 election was an anomaly that will not be repeated and expect a rise in the number of IAF members in future parliamentary delegations from Zarqa.

## Comment

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¶14. (C) Zarqa shows all of the hallmarks of political neglect, demonstrating the down side of a political system based on tribal connections rather than interest groups. In

the absence of a local government with adequate resources and a national government with a plan to raise the standard of living for the urban poor, Zarqa residents turn to tribal politicians who can extract services from the state and politicians from marginalized Islamic groups which can only protest against government policies. For its part, the state is slowly waking up to the need for political and economic enfranchisement in depressed cities like Zarqa as a means to combat radicalism that is fostered by such a political and social environment. However, the state's lack of confidence in Zarqa's elected politicians to implement policy and handle financial matters independently (symbolized by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz City and development projects implemented directly by the Royal Court) demonstrates a basic unwillingness to give community leaders a stake in their own future.

Beecroft